



The Art of Dreaming in "Three Women" and "Providence": Structures of the Self

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States of ecstasy or of non-participation in normal social exchange which my characters go through help me to find my way in the darkness towards new images, new comprehensions of ourselves. My heroes may thus seem far away from it all, but they are not far away from themselves."

He doesn't have a target audience, no specific group he wishes to address. "All I can say is that I am sure that my films encounter people, somewhere, who are still burning, still alive. One has to prove that one is still here! I meet these people, sometimes, when I watch them come out of a

cinema after a film of mine. But I am not seeking 'remnants of humanity,' as many have said, but the autonomous and the strong. Who has been frightened sees more. Perhaps I seek certain utopian things, space for human honor and respect, landscapes not yet offended, planets that do not exist yet, dreamed landscapes. Very few people seek these images today which correspond to the time we live, pictures that can make you understand yourself, your position today, our status of civilization. I am one of the ones who try to find those images."

MARSHA KINDER

The Art of Dreaming in *Three Women* and *Providence*: Structures of the Self

Three Women (written and directed by Robert Altman) and *Providence* (written by David Mercer and directed by Alain Resnais) are both reaffirming the self and human creativity on three levels of experience—dreams, conscious artistry, and social interaction. They suggest that life is a creation dominated by subjective projections of an auteur, who must make courageous aesthetic choices while accepting the limits of the structures through which one moves (with their beginnings, middles, and ends) and which operate within the self. Both films mediate between suicide and self-regeneration, but with different emphases and resolutions. Altman's *Three Women* is primarily concerned with new beginnings. Focusing on birth, the film opens with a startling sequence that plunges us into the depths of highly con-

densed visual dream images out of which the rest of the narrative slowly grows: a pregnant woman painting on the inner walls of a swimming pool an Egyptian mural of serpentine figures—a strange animal sits before two females whose limbs are intertwined, one seeming to help the other whose head is thrust back; another female sits beneath an authoritative male with outstretched arms and huge dangling phallus. Then, the image dissolves into decrepit bodies moving in circles through steamy therapeutic pools as they await death in limbo. Resnais and Mercer's film focuses on endings. Opening with the written word *Providence*, mounted on an elegant structure, the narrative pulls us through a scrambled series of fictional scenes, including repetitions and variations, and unexpectedly combining humor and

violence (one character remarks, "Violence reeks of spontaneity"), before arriving at an inevitable conclusion that comes off as a surprise—the 78th birthday of the auteur, whose death is obsessively dwelt on without ever being shown. Both films use dream structures that contain inset dreams, but which move fluidly into conscious artistic creation—painting in *Three Women* and writing in *Providence*—and into the creation of conventional personae for social interaction—a "thoroughly modern Milly" who can survive within the plastic banality of the LA wasteland in *Three Women*; and well dressed, self-controlled bourgeois relatives, who can be charmingly polite at a birthday party at the family country estate in *Providence*. Although these so-called realistic environments are familiar to us all, in these films they are transformed into dream landscapes; and the conventional social interactions that take place within them become strangely artificial. Both films succeed in dissolving the boundaries between fantasy and ordinary reality, between inner and outer experience.

Of course, these dream films have several important cinematic precursors, especially among the works of Bergman, Fellini, and Buñuel, who have all developed highly distinctive dream styles. *Persona*, *8 1/2* and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* are also controlled by dream structures that move into conscious artistry (theater, film-making, and "the good life"), and into social disguise (the deceptions needed to relate to husbands, children, and friends without revealing the coldness and despair at the core of the personality; the lies told to wives, mistresses, and collaborators in order to integrate the contradictory parts of the self; and the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie which serves to smooth things over on all embarrassing and deadly occasions). Altman draws most heavily from Bergman's *Persona*, another film based on a male auteur's dream about a female self splintered into three parts (actress, nurse, and psychiatrist); both works stress childbirth, deception, and the fusion of characters. Altman follows Bergman's narrative movement of inner penetration, probing a highly condensed germinal dream image with blurred boundaries that dissolves into others. In contrast, *Providence* is more like Fellini's *8 1/2* in its focus on a

narcissistic artist, who is obsessed with his own creative process as a means of fighting pain and death. Drawing his art from his memories, dreams, fantasies, and immediate sensory experience he projects himself onto those around him, forcing them to play roles and deliver lines that he has spun out of his own psyche. Resnais and Mercer follow Fellini's narrative movement, which goes in circles and ends with a positive acceptance of life's multiple realities and contradictions. Yet, Resnais and Mercer also adopt the absurd tone combining violence and wit that dominates Buñuel's *Discreet Charm*, and its radical play with narrative structure. The implications, however, are more subversive in Buñuel—where the anarchistic unconscious constantly moves outward, breaking all barriers, defying all rules. As the characters keep trying to escape by awakening into another reality, which later turns out to be equally absurd and threatening, we gradually realize that Buñuel is the ultimate dreamer creating all of these characters; when we finally escape his creative control, we leave the theater and enter a social reality that is another nightmarish trap. Resnais and Mercer create a slightly less threatening version as Langham at last awakens from his nightmares, and finds himself miraculously washed, dressed, and seated before sunny green fields as he awaits his children's visit. Yet, the encounter has ambiguous undertones and leaves us in doubt about the ultimate psychological or metaphysical reality.

Sissy Spacek and Shelley Duvall in the opening sequence of Altman's THREE WOMEN



He makes his children leave without saying a word or touching him, while he is still in good spirits—and then the screen goes black, symbolically rather than literally evoking the return to another night of fear and pain and his certain death. When we leave the theater, we know that our own death awaits us outside—it's just a matter of time.

Despite their stylistic differences, all of these dream-films focus on sex and death (Eros and Thanatos) and offer endless variations of the primordial triangle (mother, father, and child; super-ego, ego, and id), suggesting that dreams are the ideal setting to chart the articulation between individual uniqueness and universal pattern, Self and Structure.

The particular view of creation presented by these dream films may be illuminated by the larger cultural context. One of the dominant effects of structuralism has been the destruction of the concept of the self. Jonathan Culler describes the process very clearly.

The need to postulate distinctions and rules operating at an unconscious level in order to explain facts about social and cultural objects has been one of the major axioms that structuralists have derived from linguistics. And it is precisely this axiom that leads to what some regard as the most significant consequences of structuralism: its rejection of the notion of the "subject." A whole tradition of discourse about man has taken the self as a conscious subject. . . . But once the conscious subject is deprived of its role as source of meaning—once meaning is explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject—the self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is "dissolved" as its functions are taken up by a variety of interpersonal systems that operate through it. The human sciences, which begin by making man an object of knowledge, find, as their work advances, that "man" disappears under structural analysis.¹

Although Freud's depth psychology helped define and strengthen the conception of the self, it has been adapted by structuralists like Jacques Lacan, who discard the concept of the ego and develop instead Freud's arguments for unconscious structures controlling human behavior, which undermine the illusion of personal freedom. Freud used dreams as the primary evidence of unconscious control and developed a semiology of dream

language. Jung's personality theory could easily be subjected to a similar process of adaption, whereby the personal dimension of the self could be omitted, leaving only the collective unconscious and persona as the source of human instinct and the controlling mechanisms of human behavior; from his perspective, the collective unconscious already dominated the creation of dreams. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault puts this destruction of the self into historical perspective. He argues that man is only a recent invention of the last two centuries—an invention that was launched by Descartes, with his famous dictum, "I think therefore I am," and which has been kept alive by phenomenologists. Yet, Foucault claims it will disappear as soon as knowledge finds a new form and assures us that the destruction is being promoted by the human sciences—particularly by psychoanalysis through its charting of the unconscious and dreams, and by ethnography through its structuralist analysis of social conventions and myths. The great irony is that two of the greatest individual geniuses of our time have struck the hardest blows against the self—Freud unconsciously, and Lévi-Strauss with full intentionality. If an individual wants to defend the self, apparently dreams and myths provide the crucial battlefield.

I am suggesting that in cinema some of the most powerful auteurs are waging this battle by creating films, structured like dreams or myths, that reaffirm the existence of the self. Although one cannot make this case for Buñuel, who demystifies the nature of our entrapment within social structures by creating puppet-like characters who futilely pursue the phantom of liberty, it does apply to Bergman, Fellini, Altman, and Resnais. While Bergman and Fellini persist in mythologizing their own dreams and autobiographies, Altman and Resnais take a more indirect approach—asserting their own unique, personal stamp no matter how varied the nature of their material (Altman), or of their literary collaborators (Resnais). Although in previous films they have both dealt with subjective experience and have dissolved the lines between fantasy and ordinary reality (*Cold Day in the Park* and *Images* by Altman, and virtually all of Resnais' earlier works), *Three Women* and *Providence* are their first films to be

PROVIDENCE:
David Warner,
Ellen Burstyn,
John Gielgud,
Dirk Bogarde



totally dominated by a dream structure.

Both films lend themselves to a Gestalt approach to dreams in which all characters, settings, and props are seen as projections of the dreamer or aspects of the auteur's personality. The auteur can be interpreted on several levels. From a cosmic perspective, God is the ultimate Auteur—the Great Generator of Providential Structures—and the whole world is a projection of his image. Resnais and Mercer evoke this dimension by making one of their characters a visionary, would-be astronaut who frequently contemplates cosmic significance. On a self-reflexive level of aesthetics, Altman, Resnais, and Mercer are the creators, who allude to their own earlier works through casting or allusions² and who use their characters, settings, and events to project themselves into the conscious and unconscious minds of their viewers. In addition, Mercer and Resnais explicitly allude to other artists—such as Graham Greene who also deals wittily with death, and Hemingway (the aging writer receives as a birthday gift a knife that supposedly belonged to Papa), who also had a macho style of elegant economy and who also courageously chose his own way to die. More subtly, the opening sequence with its montage of the mysterious woods and gates surrounding the elegant mansion and the old man's hand

dropping a glass of wine evokes the opening of Welles's *Citizen Kane*, which also dissects and evaluates a man's life in a non-linear fashion. These films contribute moving images to the reservoir of cultural imagery that reprograms the dreams of the audience, implying a complex system of inter-communication between dreams and more conventional art. But in this essay, I am more interested in exploring the narrative level—what the characters, settings, props, and events reveal about the artistic dreamers within the films.

In *Three Women* it is difficult to tell who is the controlling dreamer since the three main characters move fluidly into each other. Milly (Shelly Duval) is the most interesting character who clearly dominates the film; she is the persona who is most adapted to the plastic desert environment and who ultimately cares for the other two women. This supportive role is introduced in the opening sequence where she helps the first decrepit patient into the pool. Yet, as the persona, she is not in touch with the unconscious and therefore does not believe in the power of dreams. Pinky Rose (Sissy Spacek) whose real name is Mildred and thus becomes the second Milly, is the childish ego whose process of maturation and socialization we observe. In the opening, she watches the bathers through a glass window with the same dazed

expression that she later has while observing the birth; in both scenes she seems like a dreamer viewing the action, which blurs into a surrealistic image. Pinky constantly watches the other two women with rapt attention and incorporates them into an actual dream, which occurs in the middle of the film. Willy (Janice Rule) functions as a shadow for the two Millies; even her name is a reverse mirror image of theirs. The first character we see, she is the mute, pregnant painter who gives birth to a dead child, and who creates the germinal dream image that helps the other two women get in touch with their interior. In the final scene, she tells Pinky: "I just had the most wonderful dream. I was trying to remember it but couldn't." The dream may be the whole film, but we never find out, for Milly calls the two dreamers in to supper.

Each woman is associated with a different color that is linked with her psychological role. Milly's color is yellow (ranging from English mustard to French mustard), which consistently dominates her outer facade (her clothes, her apartment decor, and her car), creating a mask of undaunted cheerfulness. Willy's colors are primary and are expressed in her creations: the blues that prevail in the murals and the pools they decorate, expressing her soulful melancholy; and the touches of red in the tongues, nails, and nipples of her serpentine creatures, in her own fingernails painted blood red, and in the blood that flows from her while she gives birth and that stains the other two women, foreshadowing their vengeful anger. Pinky Rose mediates between the other women and their colors. Her hue is expressed in her clothes like Milly, yet also in her name since she is the one actively seeking a new identity. As she goes from innocence to experience, the shade deepens from a girlish pale pink to a deep seductive rose that moves toward Willy's primordial red. The three women come together at the Purple Sage, the apartment building owned by Willy and her husband Edgar where Milly and Pinky are roommates. Here the colors are set off against vibrant, disturbing purple. In the final scene, the clothes and environment of the three women harmoniously blend into muted lavender and sage.

The main creative task for the entire personality is to recreate a vital self in spite of the sterile

environment and the impoverished cultural imprinting it has absorbed. Pinky, the ego, has escaped the Texas wasteland and her ignorant zombie parents and gone west to California where she can choose her own parental model (Milly) in order to create a new identity. What she actually encounters is another desert, that looks very much like Texas, and a new kind of zombie—"thoroughly modern Milly" who is a wound-up Barbie doll. Willy is stuck in a ghost town called Dodge City with an insensitive macho husband and his tasteless friends. She desperately needs to make contact with others. Isolated and mute, she turns inward to her unconscious forces and expresses her own psyche through her primitive murals (actually done by Bodhi Wind), which everyone but Pinky ignores. Yet each of her three paintings portrays a primal conflict among four figures—three females and one male, visually expressing the film's dramatic action. Milly, the persona, is all outward manner and style with no inner feelings or substance. An unwanted child abandoned by her mother, she has courageously planned her own life and constructed a self. Yet, since she follows the recipes and conventions of a soulless culture, she has unfortunately inherited its bad taste and values. Probably raised by television and McCalls, she has created a repertoire of behavior that follows advertising to the letter; although Pinky claims that Milly always does everything right and is the most perfect person she has ever met, everyone else cruelly ridicules and rejects her. She desperately needs a soul.

Shelley Duvall gives a brilliant performance that captures the reality, absurdity, and poignance of the character in a way that has never been done before. Altman's greatest achievement in this film is the creation of this character and her environment. He succeeds in maintaining a subtle balance between realistic depiction of the plastic cheerful facade and satiric exposure of its destructive effect on human beings. The haunting music by Gerald Busby brilliantly contributes to this effect, by fluidly introducing new tonalities behind or in place of natural sound. Through the subtlety of his densely textured audio and visual style, Altman transforms this arid "new realism" landscape into a moving nightmare.

All three women fight against their environment



Milly prepares her prefabricated gourmet dinner:

THREE WOMEN

and regenerate themselves through a three-stage process of birth in which they are fused into a single healthy personality. The first stage is a dramatic gesture. After fleeing from the primal scene enacted by Milly and Willy's husband Edgar, Pinky tries to commit suicide by leaping from the second-floor balcony into the swimming pool. The result is not death, but the rebirth of all three women. In trying to save Pinky, Willy utters her first word and realizes that her paintings at the bottom of the pool were partly responsible for the suicide leap. This act has acknowledged her unconscious power and brought her into contact with others. Though it puts Pinky into a temporary coma, the act awakens Milly out of her trance, causing her to experience authentic feelings for the first time and leading her to adopt the parental role with her young friend. When Willy and Milly visit Pinky at the hospital, each stands at the window and casts a splintered reflection. This repeated shot recalls the first time we see all three women in the same frame; Milly and Pinky stand at the window of the Dodge City Saloon, looking out at Willy, whose image is reflected between them in the glass. When Pinky finally awakens from her coma, she has adopted a new persona:

she rejects her biological parents who have come to see her and becomes a meaner version of the soulless Milly. But not surprisingly, she puts more feeling into the role; she has understood and been drawn to Willy's paintings from the very beginning because they reflect her own interior. Like a newborn infant feeding off her mother, Pinky becomes a vampire; as a selfish adolescent, she takes over Milly's clothes, apartment, car, and identity.

The second stage is Pinky's dream, in which all versions of the personality are rather clumsily condensed: the three women—individually, in splintered reflections, and together, Milly laughing and crying, Willy creating, and Pinky dying; other pairs—the twins, whose faces undergo fluid transformations, and the visiting parents; the murals separately and superimposed; and Dirty Gertie, the mechanical doll with the hysterical laughter—the insane, dehumanized creature into which the sterile environment threatens to transform the women. Awakening from the nightmare like a child, Pinky runs for comfort to Milly and they embrace: the period of parasitic rivalry is over and the integration of the ego and persona, mother and child is accomplished.

The third stage is the actual birth—in which Milly competently delivers Willy's dead child as Pinky watches in frozen terror. Just as the attempted suicide brought the rebirth, the birth kills off what is dead within the interior of the personality—the mute isolation, the fear, and the dependency on men. From this point on, the three women live together and care for each other, like mother, child, and grandmother. Willy chastizes Milly for being so mean to Pinky, but we suspect that Pinky is content with her role as obedient daughter and that Milly is acting out the fantasy of how she herself had wanted to be trained and guided by a loving mother.

As in dreams, every minor character is symbolically important and every major character is doubled, providing over-determination. As in the paintings, the primary patterns are two females and a man and a woman. The other employees at the old age spa are twins and best friends, alternative female couplings for the two Millies. Dirty Gertie and Milly's hardened ex-roommate Dierdre are two versions of what the personality could become in this dehumanized environment. The danger of imprinting is emphasized in the scene where Edgar pulls the string on Pinky's blouse as she imitates the grotesque doll, mechanically amplifying hysteria. In addition to Willy and her husband Edgar, there are a series of parent figures—Pinky's aged mother and father, who reenact the primal scene as Milly watches in fascinated horror; and the authoritarian doctor and nurse at work, who chastise Milly and Pinky like bossy superegos. Practically every male figure in the film is authoritarian and is either a father, doctor, or cop. These "dream police" undergo many transformations—pursuers, helpers, drinking buddies, and rejecting suitors. They ride dirt bikes in the desert, spinning their wheels and gunning their motors, or practice shooting their phallic guns. In contrast to the pools, which are controlled by women and associated with life, birth, and the unconscious, the shooting range is dominated by men and is associated with death and sex. The most important male character is Edgar (Robert Fortier), a "stunt double for Wyatt Earp." He also plays landlord and lover, teacher and seducer, drunkard and tease. Although he claims that he'd rather face a hundred savages

"than one woman who's learned how to shoot," we see him teaching first Milly and then Pinky how to shoot and then fucking them in the same order. Presumably, this is the same pattern he has followed with Willy. In his opening line, he warns Pinky: "Hold it, never trust a dishonest man." These words apply most tragically to Willy, whom he irresponsibly abandons when she is about to give birth to their first child. After the stillbirth, we learn that Edgar has been killed in a gun "accident," but we suspect that the three women have avenged Willy and the dead baby. In this film life is framed by dead babies and decrepitude; the individual is responsible for what happens in between. Altman reassures us that the self can recreate itself in spite of structure and culture.

In *Providence*, the controlling dreamer is clearly the writer/narrator Clive Langham (John Gielgud), who uses the other characters—his son Claud (Dirk Bogarde), his son's wife Sonia (Ellen Burstyn), his bastard Kevin Woodford (David Warner), and his dead wife Molly (who also doubles as Claud's older mistress, Helen, both played by Elaine Stritch)—as the dramatic personae in his dreams and novel. The film implies that even in waking reality, we each have our own script in which all our "significant others" are forced to act out the roles and speak the lines that we create, even if they conflict with the other's sense of reality. At one point, in an argument with Claud, Sonia bitterly quips: "I'm not a real person, I'm a fucking construction." Although in this context she blames the creation on her husband, he must share the credit with the other auteurs behind the scenes—Clive, Mercer, and Resnais. Thus, all characters must be interpreted on several levels. On the objective plane within the dreams, they perform variations on the primordial triangle, this time between mother (enacted by Sonia, Molly, or Helen), father (played by Clive, Claud and Kevin), and son (alternately starring Kevin and Claud, with Dave the football star as a rival understudy). On the subjective plane, they represent parts of Clive's personality. From a Jungian perspective, the persona is Claud, the sharp-tongued "tailor's dummy" trapped in self-control; the anima is alternately Sonia and Helen, who both double for his dead wife Molly, whose identity he used to deny; the primary shadow figure is his bastard Kevin,

who in one scene turns into a werewolf (the animal side that is dying), but the shadow also appears in several dying or dead old men and in the comical figure Dave, a bastard whom Clive has never acknowledged. From a Freudian perspective Clive is the ego, who is hounded by Claud, the "contemptuous" lawyer and "jailer," functioning as super-ego: in self defense, the ego encourages the childish id figures—the rebellious Sonia and the radical visionary Kevin—to act out their (and his) libidinal desires. Finally, in the last scene these characters present themselves through their own personae—Claud, as the sensitive son who tries to relieve his dying father of all guilt (Bogarde does a brilliant job of distinguishing this role from the others, miraculously transforming his face and body); Sonia, as the loving, happy wife and daughter-in-law; and Kevin as the serious, wise young scientist. Moreover, they are joined by new characters who play familiar roles in Clive's waking reality—two frisky dogs who stand in for the werewolves and sons (in one shot we see the dogs and sons frolicking together in an idyllic landscape), and a pair of kindly old servants who care for the dying invalid like doting parents. These multiple roles put great demands on the actors, but Gielgud and Bogarde give extraordinary performances, perhaps the best of their careers. While Warner is quite convincing, Stritch is competent but wooden and Burstyn is badly miscast and clearly out of her range.

Although Clive repeatedly justifies other characters, and especially himself, by saying that everything can be explained by a rotten childhood, he is much more interested in choosing his own ending than defending his life. The main issue in the film is how the individual—despite his imprinting as a child, his animal nature, and his inevitable death—freely selects his own style of living and dying. In one of Clive's fantasies, Kevin drapes the columns of a classical public building with a banner, proclaiming: "I think people should be allowed to die the way they choose." The film defends the art of suicide and the human right to providence. In defending himself against his critics, who claim in previous works his "search for style has often resulted in a lack of feeling," Clive insists that "style *is* feeling in its most elegant and economic expression." Gradually we realize

that behind the chain of visual images, behind the plot and narrative structure, behind the dramatic personae there is a controlling intelligence, an individual auteur who reaffirms the powers of intentionality through his style, which expresses his uniqueness. Eventually, he totally captures the narrative. The old man may be bourgeois on the outside, but he is revolutionary inside his head; thus, until the very end he never loses faith in radical transformation.

Clive's creative process involves both his conscious and his unconscious, which together control his style. Many of the scenes are like daydreams or waking fantasies, which resemble theater rather than film. More verbal than visual, they rely heavily on a theatrical use of primal props and backdrops (Claud clings to his guns, knives, and chilled white wine and likes to pose at shooting ranges and beaches). Scenes are repeated with variations in dialogue, costumes, and settings. Characters deliver long speeches in courtrooms and on balconies and trade sarcasms and snappy patter in kitchens and bedrooms. The glamorous decor of Claud and Sonia's bedroom—with its lavender walls, crystal lamps, and satin chaise—helps fulfill Clive's wish of preventing the action from descending into vulgarity. In fact, their entire house, which provides most of the settings for the daydreams, is sparse and elegant like Clive's writing style; it is full of arched doorways that allow for dramatic entrances and exits and evoke the missing proscenium. These daydreams create a sophisticated modern version of restoration comedy with Claud as star wit and Clive as prompter. The tone is absurd rather than terrifying like the nightmares.

The nightmares are comprised of strong visual images in which every detail symbolically evokes the death Clive fears. The recurring scene of a hideous autopsy being performed on an old man's corpse, which is sliced open and the organs removed, is the germinal dream image for the entire film—a dying man dissecting himself. In the final scene, this connection is made explicit as Claud asks of his father's new novel, "Who are you disemboweling this time?" In contrast to the glossiness of some of the daydream sequences, the nightmares are frequently grey and somber. The camera tracks past churches, cemeteries, and broken columns. On the streets, terrorist bombs explode,

old buildings are demolished, old men crumple, and dream soldiers arrest the decrepit and take them to open stadiums that are transformed into concentration camps; these "fatuous nightmares" draw on modern images of death that we have all absorbed. Clive's dreamwork is full of verbal and visual puns. He sets his would-be mercy killing or romantic suicide in the woods or at a wood-pile to be performed by a character named Woodford. The transformation of settings reveals his obsessive wish to forestall death and reverse time: a night scene reverts into day; sunny ocean waves break in the snow; a tired old public building contains a sleek modern travel agency with an erotic female agent, with whom he discusses sending his would-be lovers off to Bangkok.

Even the opening images suggest the theme of his wish-fulfillment. After moving in on the Providence sign posted on the ivy-covered iron gate, the camera tracks along dark green leaves, then shoots upward at a tree bark branching off in several directions, then cuts to the tree fusing with and supporting the elegantly structured multi-storied house, before moving into a lit doorway. These images are part of Clive's natural surroundings or life space, but they have also become internalized as part of his creative reservoir out of which he spins his dreams and novels through a process of radical transformation. These woods provide the setting for his first dream; the iron gate is transformed in the restaurant scene into ivy-covered brass grillwork; the color green shades all the room in which Claud appears—the courtroom, his office, his mistress's hotel room, and his own kitchen; and the branching tree suggests Clive's process of fragmenting the various parts of himself through his biological and fictional children. Later in the film, we realize that these growth images are not limited to Clive's immediate surroundings but go back to hopeful childhood memories: "I remember a green branch waving against a blue sky." The most joyful use of this image occurs in the final sequence, where the camera makes a 360° pan of the lush green woods in their full sunlit splendor as Clive reaffirms his passion for life and art. But the woods are most intensely expressive in his dreams, where they become the chosen setting for his death; Claud remarks:

Sometimes when I awaken from a dream I am very sad, as if dreaming is my only real existence. After certain dreams, nothing in real life has any intensity.

Both consciously and unconsciously Clive chooses his own ending. At every level of creation, he repeatedly has one part of himself destroying another. In the opening nightmare Kevin mercifully kills an old wounded man who is turning into a werewolf. In the final daydream he retains the same setting but recasts the roles: Claud, who was the prosecuting attorney in the previous murder, now shoots Kevin, who like the old man is turning into a wolf. In his own waking conscience, Clive fears that he was responsible for the death of his wife, his female side that he had denied. Again, he casts Claud in the role of prosecutor, yet her suicide was a mercy killing. Finally, in the waking reality of the last scene he controls the ending. Although two of his most morbid, obsessive images—the dissection of the corpse and the discovery of his wife's body in a bloody bathtub—intrude into his consciousness, he retains his wit and elegance. His mind continues to challenge all limitations externally imposed: "Nothing is written; we all believe that, don't we?" As Claud confirms, the logic of moral language ultimately gives way to the incomprehensible; the dreaming artist performs the final mediation. Clive makes the others leave so that the last image they and we in the audience see is of him alive, well, and courageous in his confrontation with death.

Providence is a brilliant film that pits the creative imagination against death. In defending the art of suicide, it celebrates life and the freedom of individual choice. Like *Three Women*, it powerfully affirms Self over Structure.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 28.
2. Altman casts Shelly Dural in one of the main roles in this film; she comes from his familiar repertory of players. Resnais alludes to his best known film *Last Year at Marienbad* through visual images: Ellen Burstyn's hairdo, the shooting range, the broken columns, the triangle within the elegant hotel (which is underscored by the line, "Let's try another hotel"), and the writer's comments on the stylistic coldness of his earlier works. For the network of allusions to earlier works by David Mercer, see Gerald Weales's review of the film in the Summer 1977 *Film Quarterly*.